

#### **2.1.4.6 Climbing Management**

National Park Service policies recognize climbing as a legitimate recreational activity within national parks, including wilderness. Climbing has been a popular activity in and around the area known today as Rocky Mountain National Park since the 1800's. The wide variety of peaks and granite rock formations in the Park provide excellent opportunities for a wide spectrum of climbing including rock, big wall, snow and ice, bouldering and mountaineering. It is a mecca for local climbers, as well as those from around the world. Opportunities for climbing exist in all management classes.

With the advent of sport climbing in the United States, this recreational pursuit has increased significantly in recent years. As the attractiveness of the sport continues to grow, it becomes necessary to balance this recreational activity with responsible management of the Park's resources. In balancing preservation versus use, the objective is to allow climbing to continue as freely as possible, while minimizing impacts on environmental resources and other park visitors. Respect for the environment and a commitment to Leave No Trace climbing techniques are required of the climbing community to maintain a mutually beneficial partnership.

With its long history of climbing activity, RMNP and the surrounding area has long been known for a strong traditional climbing ethic and concern for the resource by its users. The local climbing community does not accept practices such as placing bolts on existing routes or establishing new bolt-intensive routes and chipping or gluing new holds. Clean-climbing techniques are generally the norm. It is incumbent on the local climbing community, along with the Park, to inform and educate climbers new to the area of this fact for the ultimate protection and maintained access to climbing areas.

Many impacts (e.g., soil compaction and erosion, wildlife disturbance, noise) that are often related to climbing activities are also associated with other forms of recreation (e.g., fishing, backpacking, day hiking) while other impacts are directly related to climbing (use of chalk, fixed anchors). It is the intent of this section to focus on the impacts directly related to climbing and when necessary general impacts at specific climbing areas. Climbing bivouacs are covered in Section 2.1.4.4 Backcountry Permit and Reservation System.

#### **Littering/Human Waste.**

Non-degradable litter is common in all areas of visitation. Litter as it relates to climbing, is deposited by climbers, climbing spectators and at bivouac (bivy) sites. Athletic tape is sometimes found at the base of crack climbs due to its loss of adhesion. Ledges and the base of cliffs have been found to have fecal matter scattered around. Some bivy sites pose a problem, since waste cannot be buried. Decomposition of waste is a problem at high elevations due to cold temperatures. Exposed waste pose health problems to other climbers or wildlife and aesthetically degrades the user experience.

Climbers should clean up after themselves and pack out trash and garbage. Climbers will be encouraged to pack out human waste when in an area where cat holes or other appropriate means of human waste disposal (e.g., privies, smear technique in sun-exposed areas away from drainages and travel routes) are not available or appropriate.

### **Erosion.**

*Off the rock* - climbers and mountaineers often bushwhack and scramble to gain access to the base of the cliff. Numerous steep approach trails have resulted. These access trails typically are braided with other trails to the same climb. Because they travel straight up the grade, water is diverted onto the trails, causing soil loss, trenching and loss of vegetation. At the base of climbs in high use areas (e.g., Lumpy Ridge), the ground is typically compacted and denuded of vegetation. Social trails often contour along the base of the rock formation to the start of other climbs.

Access trails to the base of well-known and heavily used climbing routes will be identified, delineated, hardened and maintained in order to prevent further erosion problems, loss of vegetation and to establish a pattern of use. In certain instances, signs may be placed to direct climbers away from problem or sensitive areas in order to protect resources. Social trails that have developed over long periods of time, but currently see infrequent use, will be rehabilitated to discourage future travel. Travel in high use areas (e.g., Lumpy Ridge, Management Class 4) will be on established access trails and corridors. Dispersed travel to the base of climbs will be encouraged in climbing areas where access trails are not provided.

*On the rock* - through continuous use, the rock surface becomes smoother and freer of lichens, moss and dirt. Ledges and cracks also loose dirt and vegetation from climbing traffic. Toe and finger holds become worn off, or are not in a useful location for some climbers. To make a climbing route more accommodating, a few climbers alter routes by gluing on artificial holds or they may chip or pry the rock to create or improve holds.

The gluing and chipping of holds will not be allowed. Aggressive, intentional "gardening" or cleaning the rock of soil and vegetation will not be allowed.

### **Social Impacts.**

While climbing is widely accepted within RMNP, the activity has not previously been addressed through an approved policy or regulation. Under the Code of Federal Regulations, various aspects of climbing recreation are managed in order to protect park resources. Individually, climbers come from a broad spectrum of backgrounds with equally broad sets of values and ethics. This has occasionally led to conflicts among users. In many instances, climber-agency relations have suffered due to imposed regulations and/or restrictions to climbing or access. The climbing community and park staff will continue to work together to mitigate user conflicts.

### **Noise.**

Climbers frequently utilize vocal signals to communicate specific needs during a climb to facilitate safe ascent or descent. Such noise can disrupt wildlife or impact hikers adjacent to climbing areas. Other noises (e.g., rock hammers) are also considered intrusive in the wilderness setting.

Climbers will be encouraged to be sensitive to the value of natural quiet. Rock hammers must be used judiciously during sensitive times for wildlife (e.g., breeding, nesting) and in areas where other visitors may be disturbed.

### **Wildlife.**

Many of the popular climbing areas in the Park are also prime habitat for some species of wildlife. Birds of prey frequently nest on rocks along and adjacent to established climbing routes. Concerns exist for both birds and climber safety.

The spring raptor area closures program has been a very successful means to reduce impacts. This program will continue. Temporary closures will be used to protect nesting raptors during critical phases of the courtship, nesting, and fledging periods. Prophylactic closures will occur in early spring of areas historically used by raptors. Raptor activity will be monitored and those areas or routes with current raptor use will be closed. Other areas where activity is discovered will also be closed. Closures will be in effect long enough to ensure protection and non-disturbance of the birds. Temporary closures may be effected for other wildlife protection as necessary.

### **Visual Impacts/Chalk.**

Visual impacts associated with climbing vary depending on the viewer's attitude towards climbing in general and their proximity to the activity. Bright colored slings, shiny metal bolts, white chalk and the sight of climbers and ropes on an otherwise undisturbed formation can be viewed as intrusive. The use of chalk may also cause a change in pH when it comes in contact with lichens, inhibiting growth or destroying the plant.

Climbers will be encouraged to wear clothing and use protection, slings, and other equipment that blend in with the natural surroundings. The use of chalk will be allowed, however climbers will be encouraged to be sensitive to visual and environmental impacts that could occur.

### **Hardware/Equipment.**

A wide range of equipment and hardware has been developed over time to be used as protection for the climber. Hammer driven pitons which widened and scarred cracks have been generally replaced by removable devices, assisting in "clean climbing" practices. However, the exploration of steeper, more difficult face climbing has led to an increase in the placement of fixed, artificial protection (e.g., bolts) by some climbers.

The use of removable and fixed anchors, as well as other climbing equipment, is appropriate in wilderness. However, fixed anchors must be placed judiciously and closely managed in order to prevent the degradation of wilderness resources and character. Where anchor points are necessary for climber safety, the use of removable equipment is desired and highly recommended. Fixed anchors should not be placed merely for convenience or to make an otherwise "unclimbable" route climbable.

Fixed anchors (e.g., webbing, bolts, pitons, chains) currently in place may remain. They may be replaced, or removed, by individual climbers, during a climb, or the NPS, during park operations. Safety remains a responsibility of the climber. The NPS will not, as policy or practice, monitor fixed anchors to evaluate their condition or accept any responsibility for fixed anchors.

The placement of new fixed anchors may be allowed when necessary to enable a safe rappel when no other means of descent is possible, to enable emergency retreat, during self rescue situations. The infrequent placement of new fixed anchors is allowed when ascending a route to connect terrain that is otherwise protected by removable anchors (e.g., one crack system or other natural feature to another) or when there are no features which will accommodate removable equipment but the occasional placement of a fixed anchor may provide a modicum of safety during the ascent (e.g., traditional face climbing). New, bolt intensive climbing routes (e.g., sport climbs, bolt ladders) are not appropriate in wilderness and should not be created. The Park may place and maintain fixed anchors for administrative and emergency purposes.

When a climber determines the need for anchor placement or replacement, this must be accomplished in compliance with regulated and permitted standards (e.g., power drills prohibited). At this time there is no permit or approval system in place, or proposed, with regard to the placement of fixed anchors; however, one may be developed and implemented if the Park determines it is necessary, through research and monitoring, to protect natural and cultural resources.

#### **Patrol, Education and Enforcement program.**

Without a visible patrol and education/enforcement program, educational efforts, policies and regulations will have minimal effect. An important aspect of the patrol function is the incorporation of education, research, monitoring and impact mitigation. Park patrols are predicated on the commitment to protect the resource, educate visitors, guard against illegal activities, provide necessary assistance and perform search and rescue functions in cases of emergency incidents. Patrols will focus primarily on 1) the education of visitors as to resource impact issues, minimum impact techniques and preventative search and rescue and 2) the enforcement of applicable laws and regulations when necessary and appropriate.

The Park will conduct a strong educational effort promoting minimum impact techniques and sound climbing ethics as outlined in the Conscious Climbing brochure and Leave No Trace Outdoor Skills and Ethics: Rock Climbing booklet. In essence, climbers will be encouraged to:

- Use colors that blend in with natural environment of the area
- Pack out all litter
- Use existing trails to approach climbs
- Know and respect environmentally sensitive areas (Raptor closures)
- Know and abide by all regulations
- Avoid placing permanent protection
- Be considerate of wildlife and other users

The Park will conduct preventative search and rescue programs proactively and upon request for local and regional groups and organizations.

As enforcement measures become necessary, the patrol staff will enforce applicable regulations (e.g., no power drills for bolt placement, no pets in the backcountry/wilderness, illegal guiding activities, violation of raptor closures, illegal camping and bivying, resource degradation for the purpose of enhancing a climbing route). The following regulations guide park management of climbing activities:

Title 36 CFR 2.1 Preservation of natural, cultural and archeological resources  
Prohibits practices of possessing, destroying, injuring, defacing, removing, digging or disturbing (chipping, gluing or gardening) from its natural state any park features.

Title 36 CFR 2.2 (a)(2) Wildlife Protection  
Prohibits feeding, touching, teasing, frightening or intentional disturbing of wildlife nesting, breeding or other activities.

Title 36 CFR 2.12 Audio Disturbances  
Prohibits the practice of utilizing motorized equipment or machinery which creates unreasonable noise, particularly in undeveloped areas (motorized rock drills).

Title 36 CFR 1.5 (f) Closures and Public Use Limits  
Temporary closures of specific climbing routes and areas will be enforced to insure prudent management of raptor nesting areas where they coincide with popular climbing routes.

Climbing is a "high risk" sport, and climbers are solely responsible for their own safety. While the National Park Service has the authority to provide search and rescue services to climbers in need of assistance, there is no legal requirement to do so. All rescue activities will be managed to provide necessary treatment to the sick and injured, keeping in mind "light on the land" and Leave No Trace rescue actions.

#### **Research and Monitoring.**

The last inventory of fixed anchors was completed in 1990. A current inventory will be conducted and updated at least every three years. The Park will develop and maintain an inventory and monitoring program to gather essential information on how climbing activities affects natural, cultural and ecological resources.

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